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ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING March 7, 2011

TESTIMONY OF SANDY BRESLIN, DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS AUDUBON CONNECTICUT

IN SUPPORT OF:

H.B. 5203 AN ACT AUTHORIZING AN AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT ON THE LANDS OF THE SOUTHBURY TRAINING SCHOOL.

H.B. 6263 AN ACT CONCERNING THE TRANSITION FROM THE TEN MILL PROGRAM.

H.B. 6262 AN ACT CONCERNING THE COMMUNITY INVESTMENT ACCOUNT

Audubon Connecticut, the state organization of the National Audubon Society with more than 10,000 members statewide, works to protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats through education, science and conservation, and legislative advocacy for the benefit of people and the earth's biological diversity. Through our network of community-based nature centers, protected wildlife sanctuaries, and local volunteer Chapters, we seek to connect people with nature and inspire the next generation of conservationists.

Senator Meyer, Representative Roy and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. Audubon Connecticut, the state organization of the National Audubon Society **strongly supports** the intent of *H.B. 5203, AA Authorizing An Agricultural Easement on the Lands of the Southbury Training School* that seeks to protect farmland and farm operations in the Town of Southbury while also protecting a key parcel of protected habitat for wildlife. This proposal is a **no-cost way** to help us meet our state farmland preservation goals, while also helping to conserve habitat for some of our state's most endangered bird species.

The estimated 900 acres of undeveloped, state-owned fields, shrublands, and woodlands at the Southbury Training School (agricultural and associated lands) form the heart of a nearly contiguous swath of protected land that runs from Good Hill Airport in Roxbury to the Housatonic River in Southbury, including the 750 acres of land owned and managed by the Audubon Center at Bent of the River. Taken together, these lands (which do not include the major structures of the School) offer a rare landscape of protected grassland and shrubland habitat that is fast vanishing in the State of Connecticut. Some of the birds that utilize this land include: Bobolink, Eastern meadowlark, Brown thrasher, Long-eared owl, Savannah and Field sparrow, American kestrel, wintering raptors and other open

country birds, as well as more than 100 species of migrant birds. A number of these bird species are in trouble and disappearing from our state. Long-eared owl is classified as Endangered, but has been confirmed as a nester on the property for the past five (5) years. American kestrel is listed as Threatened, while Bobolink, Eastern meadowlark, Brown thrasher, and Savannah sparrow are all state species of Special Concern.

Working collaboratively, agricultural stakeholders, open space supporters, and wildlife conservationists have for a number of years been seeking to permanently dedicate these agricultural lands, now owned and managed by the Department of Social Services (DSS), to permanent agricultural use. Originally cultivated to provide food for the residents and staff of the Southbury Training School, in recent years, the lands have been leased to local farmers. Unfortunately, needed maintenance of structures such as barns and essential utilities such as water have not been possible under DSS's mission and budget driving at least one dairy farmer off the land and to New York State.

In order to ensure that habitat conservation remains a permanent part of the property's agricultural future, Audubon offers the following recommendations to the Committee:

- Consult with the Department of Environmental Protection's Wildlife Division regarding areas that may benefit from additional protection and/or conservation management strategies that may go beyond usual agricultural practice.
- Require development of a habitat management plan that allows for maximum agricultural use of the property while also preserving those areas that are of highest ecological and habitat value.
- Ensure continued public access to the property compatible with agricultural use. For example, the area has been routinely inventoried for many years as part of Audubon's Christmas and Summer Bird Counts, and data from the site is now an important part of the largest and oldest citizen-science inventory in the nation.

Audubon Connecticut strongly urges you **to support** H.B. 5203, *AA Authorizing an Agricultural Conservation Easement on the Lands of the Southbury Training School*. This proposal offers a unique opportunity to promote agriculture and conserve wildlife habitat at **no cost** to taxpayers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on this important matter.

H.B. 6263 AN ACT CONCERNING THE TRANSITION FROM THE TEN MILL PROGRAM.

Audubon offers its strong support for H.B. 6263, *AAC The Transition From The Ten Mill Program*, which seeks to conserve more than 14,000 acres of forestland in 34 towns currently protected under the 100-year old tax program known as 10 Mill by capping the property tax rate for 10 Mill landowners at the rate paid by forest landowners in the P.A. 490 program and allowing 10 Mill forest landowners who have already put their land under conservation easements the ability to transition into the P.A. 490 program without

incurring a penalty. Connecticut's core forestlands are fast disappearing, primarily as a result of fragmentation due to development. This proposal would help to protect the important habitat, timber resources and scenic beauty of these historic forests areas.

H.B. 6262 AN ACT CONCERNING THE COMMUNITY INVESTMENT ACCOUNT.

As a member of the Community Investment Act Coalition, Audubon Connecticut supports the provisions of H.B. 6262, *AAC The Community Investment Account*, which will allow for continuing and much-needed support of Connecticut's agriculture economy, particularly dairy, and farmland preservation.. The Community Investment Act (CIA) program is currently the key mechanism that provides funding to sustain farming, protect open space, preserve historic structures, and create affordable housing in our state. Dairy farm viability is easily affected by fluctuations in the price of milk, and since this type of agriculture utilizes the largest amounts of land, loss of dairy farms can result in substantial loss of key agricultural and associated open lands. Continuing the current funding allocation for CIA will promote jobs, create partnerships and help to improve quality of life in Connecticut. We urge the Environment Committee to support this legislation and the good public policy it promotes. To learn more about the job creating impact of the Community Investment Act:

[http://www.communityinvestmentact.org/Get the Flyer .php](http://www.communityinvestmentact.org/Get_the_Flyer.php)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on these important matters.

